

The Air Pilot

By Randall Parrish

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SYNOPSIS. In the smoking room of the Cedric, Hadley, an amateur aviator, tells of the mysterious disappearance of the Dessaud monoplane advertised to appear at the Chicago Aviation Meet. It seems that Phillip Dessaud, a French army officer had discovered a silent engine which the German secret agents were after. He registered at the Congress Hotel, was assigned to Room 1-54 and that was the last heard of him. After Hadley ceased speaking one of the gentlemen offered his card and said: "Messieurs, I am Phillip Dessaud, and smiling tells the story: He reached Chicago in the afternoon, drove with the French Consul to the Aviation Grounds, found everything in perfect condition, went back to the Congress Hotel, and while sitting in his room the phone suddenly rang and a lady's voice says, 'Is that you, Phillip?' He protested he did not know Mademoiselle but largely out of curiosity consented to meet her in front of the Art Building at dusk. She pretended she had expected to meet Phillip Houser. As the lady appeared to be in distress and hungry, Dessaud insisted that they go to a restaurant. There she confessed to him that she was Helen Probyn, a reporter, and had been assigned to interview him; her managing editor, a German named Schmitt, having outlined the plan she had followed; that after an interview of Schmitt with one Johann Brandt she had seen a draft on a Berlin bank to Schmitt for \$1,000; and that from the peculiar nature of the assignment she was sure a scheme was being laid to get the secret of the silent monoplane.

In the face of this warning, Dessaud went with the girl to an underworld cafe, where she had been directed to take him. Schmitt, Brandt and others with them managed to meet Dessaud; they chatted a while over their wine and as Dessaud and the whole party were leaving a fake fight was staged in which Dessaud was knocked into insensibility. He was thrown into a taxi, taken to a hotel where on regaining consciousness he heard Brandt and Franzen discussing the incident.

From this conversation he learns the truth. Brandt by bribery or by force if necessary, meant to get the secret of the monoplane. Dessaud fought for his liberty but was overpowered. The hotel detective was attracted by the noise of the fight, but Brandt explained that Dessaud was a member of his party and was temporarily crazed by drink. With this explanation accepted it was possible for Brandt and his companions to take Dessaud out of the hotel without any interference whatever. After an unsuccessful attempt to gain the secrets by bribery Dessaud was taken out and put in a taxi. Helen Probyn after the cafe incident, became alarmed at what might have happened to Dessaud and had followed to the hotel. She was seen by Brandt who forcefully threw her into the taxi. The taxi was driven, to the southern part of the city to a fine old abandoned residence, the caretaker of which was being paid by Brandt. Here Dessaud fought again for the liberty of Miss Probyn and himself, but again was overpowered. Both Miss Probyn and Dessaud were now held prisoners under the same roof. Brandt again tried to get Dessaud's secret, but did not succeed. Dessaud was then placed in a cement room in the basement which the owner of the property had once used to confine his brother—a victim of alcoholism. Just before the door was locked Brandt said: "My offer still remains \$25,000."

Dessaud began a systematic search for some way to get out, not only for himself but so he could aid Miss Probyn. He pushed the prison cot aside and found a place in the concrete which had been covered with cloth. This opened into a shaft which had evidently been used for a dumb waiter. Cautiously he made his way up the shaft to the kitchen. Going toward the front of the house he discovered Franzen and Swigert, the keeper. They had been drinking. Brandt had left for the Congress hotel to get Dessaud's grips. Franzen sent Swigert down to guard the prison—and, then courageous by reason of drink, made his way to Miss Probyn's room. Dessaud cautiously followed. Miss Probyn suspected Franzen's intentions but was unable to make him leave her room. Finally when she rushed for the door Franzen grabbed her and Dessaud sprang into the rooms and the struggle began, in which Franzen was thrown against a window ledge and killed. Dessaud and Miss Probyn, alarmed at new complications caused by Franzen's death began planning at once a systematic means of escape.

In groping about they came upon the body of a dead man—Ramon, one of Dessaud's mechanics. Evidently Ramon had been induced to drink to excess and had died as a result.

Brandt returned before they got away, but by making their way cautiously they were able to gain the doorway, only to be met by a policeman and a plain clothes man. By a clever ruse and some violence they were able to get away from them and dash away in Brandt's car, and after several adventures in which Miss Probyn showed her good judgment, they finally reached the neighborhood in which the hangar was located.



"**RELY** from Chicago for the present," I assured her hastily. "No one will ever press this case. Once Brandt fails in gaining what he is seeking after, he will be only too glad to hush the whole matter up. The German Embassy will realize that a court trial would reveal their entire system of secret service in this country, and will devise means for concealing the whole affair. The police have no special incentive to hunt us down, and will doubtless find it convenient to do otherwise. I believe, Mademoiselle, that if we can once make the escape there will be no pursuit."

"Then I merely disappear? simply drop out of sight?"

"Yes, your friends will wonder, but—"

"Oh, it is not so much friends. I have acquaintances, of course, but none who will be greatly alarmed. I was not thinking of others, but myself, Monsieur—my life."

"Your life? You mean your future?"

"Yes; it is such a reckless thing to do, a leap into the dark. You do not realize the consequences; I am not even sure that I do—but—but it frightens me a little. I sprang into the cab, because I was impelled to by the conditions; it was the impulse of the moment. But now I hesitate to go on, to do what I half promised you I would. It means I must risk everything."

"You have no reference to danger—physical danger?"

Her quick gesture was scornful.

"Not for a moment. I could laugh at that. Nor do I fear others, what the world might say, the scandal of tongues. What I am afraid of, Monsieur, is myself, my own self-respect, my own judgement of right and wrong. For I am my own judge, and abide by my judgment. You believe in me, Monsieur?"

"I do."

"Yet you have known me only through the darkness of this night. Why, if it was not so serious, it would be ridiculous. I—I cannot laugh, and yet I am half inclined. Can you conceive such a condition? You barely know my name, my business; you cannot by any possibility read my character, or be acquainted with my associates. Yet you urge me to fly with you in the night to some unknown spot; ask me to leave all and trust you, a stranger. Monsieur, why do you do this? how can you venture to ask it of me? Is it because you think me of a lower order? of a class to care little for consequences? Is it your foreign conception of women who work, who earn their own living, which gives courage to make such a proposal? Do you realize what it may cost me to say yes?"

"I think I do, Mademoiselle," I replied earnestly, moved by the intensity of her manner, "yet your words are unjust. The choice has become

restricted to one of two things—to remain here, and face the certainty of arrest, or trust yourself to my skill and my manhood. I cannot believe you lack confidence in either."

Her hand clasp tightened.

"I do not," she said firmly. "If I did I should not even hesitate."

"Then why do you? What is it you fear?"

"Myself; my own judgment. But I am going to trust it, Monsieur; I am going with you, wherever you go."

"You are strange, Mademoiselle," gazing down into her face. "You will not let me say what I wish, yet you trust me in everything?"

"Yes, in everything. It must be that, or nothing. I have, as you say, only the one choice between two. Very well, I have chosen; it is to trust you. You understand, Monsieur?"

"That you go where I go."

"And do whatever you say."

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE HANGAR.

Someway, as never before in all my experience with the sex, this woman held me from her: Even as she voiced her trust, there remained a reserve between us unbroken. She accepted my protection, yielded to my suggestion, and yet I could not determine safely the state of mind which impelled her to this action. There were words of love trembling upon my lips, but they remained unspoken. I longed to pour forth protestation and promise, but was restrained by fear lest such language would drive her away. I had no thought that she actually cared for me, other than a friendship born of the night's adventures. There was nothing in either words or actions to yield me greater hope. She had simply chosen the part which seemed to her best. It had no direct reference to me; the choice would have been the same had it involved any other man in whom she reposed confidence. I seemed to read all this in her uplifted eyes, as I held her hands tightly clasped in mine, and the tease was fully aware of my predicament, her smile breaking into soft laughter.

"You are glad!"

"Certainly I am; now I can go forward in confidence."

"But I will only burden you."

"Impossible, Mademoiselle; rather you inspire."

"Compliments, Monsieur, compliments," and she drew herself gently away. "To listen only wastes time, and we need the moments. You know how to proceed?"

"Yes, we will go now. If anyone heard the sound of the motor car, they will believe it merely turned this corner, and passed on."

There was a high brick wall, surrounding some institution, and we kept along in its shadow, walking noiselessly. This being in the residence district no one was upon the street at so early an

hour. A policeman appeared under a distant light, a mere dark shadow, and we waited silently until he disappeared up a side street. Then we hurried forward to the edge of the vacant lot. In the darkness nothing appeared familiar, yet I knew the hangar was not far away, as it had been erected not far from the street running north and south. I stared out into the open space, hoping to see some gleam of light which would act as a guide, but all was black silence. In her nervousness the girl pressed close to my side, and I could hear her swift breathing.

"Is this the place, Monsieur?"

"It must be; it is situated the same, although there is nothing I recognize. The hangar should be there," pointing, "but I perceive no light."

She looked in the direction indicated, shading her eyes with one hand.

"There is something to the left; just a shapeless something, it might be a shed."

We groped our way forward cautiously, across a slight ditch, edged with weeds, and then over the irregular land, covered with long grass. Our feet sank into this silently, but the depressions caused me to stumble, and I again caught her hand. Every step took us farther from the street lamps, and I could no longer distinguish her face; ahead the gloom was almost impenetrable. Suddenly she stopped, holding me tightly.

"Wait! be still," she whispered swiftly. "I can see now; kneel down here—look where I point."

I made out the outlines, but they were vague, indistinct. Her eyes must have been better than mine, for as I continued to stare at the object, she spoke again.

"Do you see? It is an automobile. Did your men have one?"

"No," instantly realizing what this must mean. "Brandt is ahead of us. That is why there is no light; he is up to mischief already. If I only knew exactly where the hangar was! I am lost in this darkness."

"It is there, Monsieur, I am sure—beyond the machine. I can see something there darker than the sky. What will you do?"

"Examine the car first. We must be sure it is empty. Keep behind me now, but not so far as to lose sight of me."

Without waiting to hear any protest I moved forward, revolver in hand, assured she would never remain far away, yet anxious to be free to face alone any danger that might confront us. That this automobile had been used to transport Brandt, and some of party, I had no doubt. It could be no one else, for they alone had an object to be accomplished there in the small hours of the night. And I must win out against them at whatever cost; yet I was alone—worse than alone, handicapped by the presence of the girl, and pitted against I knew not how many. My strength lay in the darkness of the

night, and the fact that Brandt would naturally think this the most unlikely place for me to come. If, by any chance he had grown careless—had become reckless in the apparent success of his scheme to be rid of me—then there was still hope I might checkmate the fellow even single-handed. It was worth trying, and I had far more to gain than lose in the venture.

In this spirit I approached the black shadow of the machine from the rear, studying its outlines as best I could in the gloom, becoming more and more convinced that it stood there deserted. A moment later this was verified, as I crept along the side and felt within, to assure myself no one slept in the seats. As I straightened up again, satisfied on this point, I perceived her shadow already at the rear wheels.

"There is no one there?"

"No, and the power is off. A seven-passenger car, so it is hard to judge how many are present."

"You believe it brought Captain Brandt?"

"Yes, and others. It could be no one else here at such an hour, and he would not be alone in a car of this size. At first I imagined he might expect me to come here, but I have changed my mind. He believes we are frightened by the police, and have found some hiding place. Otherwise he would have guards out watching for me to appear; he would never leave this car unprotected. Do you think he would?"

She stood thinking, staring about into the darkness, hesitating to answer.

"I—I should not suppose so, unless—unless it is a trap, Monsieur; but you are a soldier, you can judge better than I."

"And I shall take no unnecessary risks. I might be reckless without you to protect, but could not be with you here. Can you see the shed?"

"Yes, it is almost straight ahead, a long, low building, but it is all dark."

"If there was a light," I explained, "it would not show from this side, as the only opening is to the east. There is a small workshop at the north end, built on to the original, but with a door between, and a separate entrance. We will try to attain that."

"Am I to go with you?"

"Will not that be better than remaining here alone? This is a gloomy spot, and someone might come out. Once in the shop safely, and the chances of discovery are lessened."

"I can do as you say. I am not going to be afraid—but—Monsieur—"

"Yes."

"You—you will be careful! You realize what it will mean to me if anything happens to you?"

"I do, Mademoiselle; the situation would be distressing. I will do my best."

"But that is not it," she insisted, speaking without restraint. "I was not considering my danger so much as yours. These men could have no object in injuring me, but would gladly